

Why we need to stop putting age limits on our achievements



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Do you have a deadline of when you want to be married by? (Picture: Ella Byworth for Metro.co.uk)

It's official. I will now never be included in any '30 under 30' lists. The crushing realisation of that sent me into an existential spiral for at least a week.

But the very existence of these kind of lists highlights society's pervasive obsession with youth – the younger you are when you achieve something, the more it means. But why?

Surely success is success, more pride in our achievement, additional achievement in rate for everyone on earth.

So many of us judge our success by arbitrary deadlines and career milestones. It's the reason why so many people

are programmed to feel that although youth is an advantage, it dwindles at the same rate.

As we get older, we give ourselves more time to make it. It's part of the



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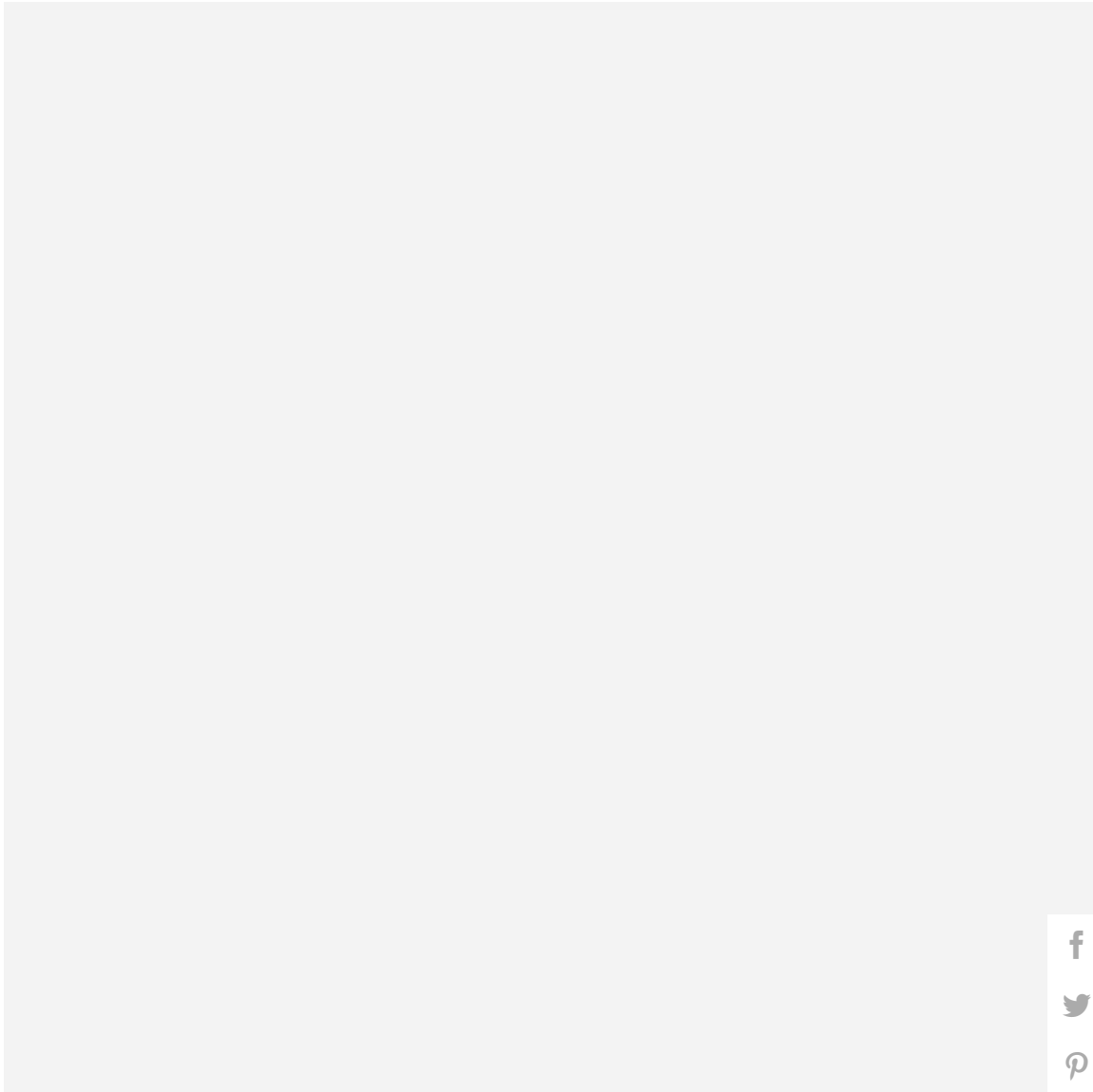
And it starts young.

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Remember primary school? Deciding that you would be married with a house and two children by the time you were 25?

As 25 loomed, this deadline became increasingly laughable. But on my 30th birthday I instinctively felt myself setting new timers – for promotion, buying a property, starting a family.



'I've always been obsessed with the idea of achieving things young' (Picture: Ella Byworth for Metro.co.uk)

Is this internal clock useful? Or is an incessant, ticking deadline adding unnecessary pressure to our already stress laden lives?

Rebecca has achieved a lot in a relatively short amount of time, she is determined to hit the targets she has set for herself. She knows what she wants to achieve and when she wants to do it by.

'I've always been obsessed with the idea of achieving things young and I have been really bad for thinking that success means less as I get older,' Rebecca tells Metro.co.uk.

'I've always had an internal list of things I need to do before I'm 20, 25, 30.

'At the moment I'm aiming to have one child, four books, a more developed media career and own a home by 30. Even though it makes absolutely no difference whether I have those things

at 31 or 29.

‘In some ways it has been good because it drives me on to be more successful, but in other ways it’s oppressive and sets me up to feel like a failure.

‘I’ve been obsessed with “X under X” lists for as long as I can remember, and have just made my first one – something I’m delighted about, but which I shouldn’t have been so obsessed with.’

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Rebecca can identify the positives in these time-limits, she says they help fuel her ambition. But why are we all obsessed with achieving things young?

Surely an exciting life event would mean just as much to you at 40 as it would at 25 – so why the pressure? For many of us, these deadlines do little but set us up to feel like failures.

There is likely a combination of factors at work.

Firstly there is the concept of youth as currency.

This is a pervasive, Western idea that reveres youth above all else – and it particularly affects women. Over the age of 40, sometimes even younger, women start to become invisible. We don’t see them in movies, TV shows, ad campaigns or even reading the news.

One study found that women over 40 are widely ignored by advertisers, another found that older **women are being forced out of the workplace** as age discrimination disproportionately affects female employees.

Secondly, there are external, societal pressures. Incessant questions about your achievements can make you feel as though you have to charge through life, full pelt towards the next tick-box.

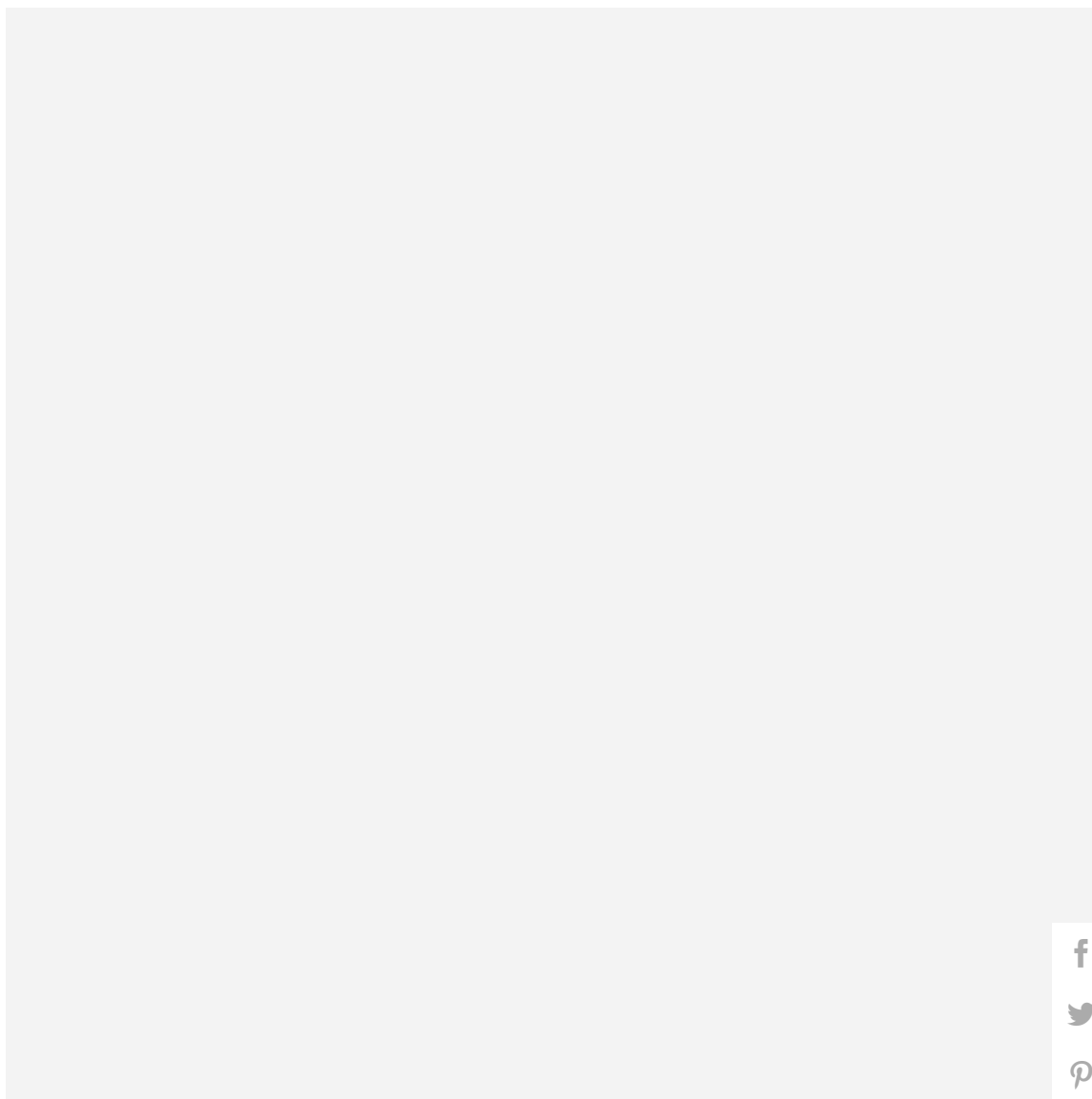
But, more often than not, no sooner have you ticked one box the questions about the next box will start rolling in. ‘So, when’s baby number two?’

Aimie has recently turned 30. She has been with her boyfriend for years and the pressure about ‘next steps’ is relentless.

‘Everyone always asks me, “do you think you’ll get married?” “when are you going to get married?”, and while I do want those things, the outside pressure makes me feel like I should be unhappy they haven’t happened yet, or that there is something wrong with me or my relationship which means that it hasn’t,’ Aimie tells Metro.co.uk.

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'It has caused issues with me not appreciating how happy I am and putting pressure on myself to think this should have happened, rather than knowing that it really doesn't make any difference to my life that it hasn't.



'I don't think I realised actually how difficult it would be to achieve my goals' (Picture: Ella Byworth for Metro.co.uk)

'I felt the need to appear tough and put time-frames in so people wouldn't think I was being walked over, even though actually I'm pretty sure I was less bothered than others about it.

'I know I then fed into the pressure and equally put it on myself. I guess I had a view that I would be married by now and it's hard to change that and appreciate what I have today.

'I also realise that while I struggle with people asking me these questions, I do exactly the same to others, I think it's this social norm thing that at our age the next thing is marriage and babies – so it kind of occupies the conversation a lot of the time.'

And it isn't only in her relationship that Aimie feels like this. She has an impressive career as a lawyer, but still the pressure is there.

'I massively put pressure on myself because I qualified later than the norm. 25-year-olds are further ahead career wise than me and that's scary,' says Aimie.

'This is definitely all pressure from myself though, as I thought it would just all happen and you're told that when you're a kid. I don't think I realised actually how difficult it would be to achieve my goals.'

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The concept of a biological clock is another reason why time pressure is disproportionately affecting women. I am reminded with increasing regularity that my fertility will 'drop off a cliff' in my mid-30s. A comment which is neither helpful nor comforting.

Anna is a dancer and feels this acute, time-sensitive pressure when it comes to starting a family.

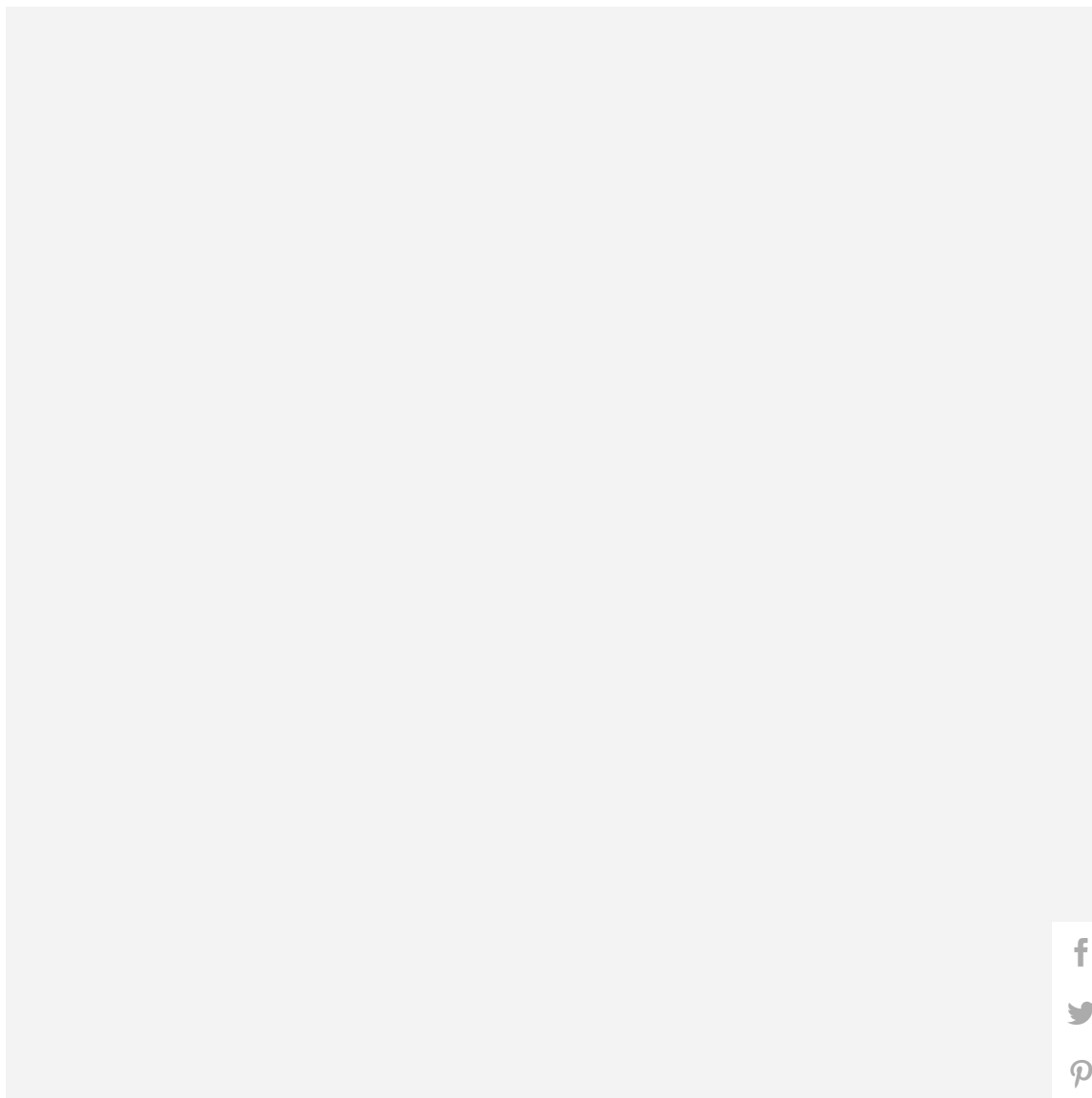
'As a freelance performer, the pressure to have kids by a certain age is huge and often misunderstood,' Anna tells Metro.co.uk.

'So many of my friends either have kids or are talking about kids. As a dancer, that decision will change everything for me. My body is my instrument, my work, my art.

'I'll have to take a lot of time out of my career – maybe it will mean the end of my professional performance career. That might seem irrational or unreasonable to some, but as a freelancer it's a real fear and it has been the harsh reality for some of my friends.

'Time away from dancing could make it almost impossible to stay relevant and take advantage of opportunities that sustain your career.

'But, more importantly, I worry about my relationship with my body changing. Not only physically but emotionally. Some mothers I know bounced back like super humans, but others had a more difficult time getting their body back.



'Some people judge me for putting my career, or myself, first' (Picture: Ella Byworth for Metro.co.uk)

'On an emotional level, I know myself and I know I would want as much time with my baby as possible, especially in the beginning and I can foresee sacrificing my career for my family, so I just want to be 100% sure that I'm ready for that.'

'I plan on having kids in my 30s, some people understand but others judge me for putting my career, or myself, first.'

Somi Arian is a **millennial engagement specialist and filmmaker**. She has spent time looking into this particular affliction of time pressures and analysing what millennials can do to shift their perspectives.

She says it's important to remember that we are not all starting from a level playing field.

'Every day, we are exposed to social media images of entrepreneurs who seem to have it all at

ever increasingly younger ages,' says Somi.

'In 2018, 62% of digital natives have said that they wanted to be entrepreneurs. Of those who worked in companies, 35% already had a side hustle.

'We are reminded by high profile entrepreneurs on Instagram and YouTube that "speed is the currency of our time". We need to act faster and work harder.

'You want to be a 20 under 20, a 30 under 30, or a 40 under 40! Who sets these deadlines? We are not all equal in our starting point. Is it realistic for people of diverse backgrounds to be measured by the same yardsticks of success?

'At times my own company's young staff have displayed the same levels of anxiety over their achievements. I tell them, "I hear you", because that was once me.

'For years I dealt with so much anxiety over not achieving certain career goals by certain self-inflicted deadlines.

'I was failing to take into consideration my physical conditions, my background as an immigrant, skin colour, accent, psychological makeup, gender, and many other factors.

'So it has taken a huge amount of work and self-reflection to stop beating myself up. Only after this realisation have I been able to see the real impact.

'Now that I have actually started seeing meaningful achievements in my career, I no longer think of them as deadlines. Instead, for the first time, I see it as a game, one that I'm enjoying playing.

'Another thing that reinforced this change of attitude was when I started hiring people that were ten years or so younger than myself and I could see how they were suffering from the same pressures that I did in the past.

'So I started sharing my experience with them and teaching them self-reflection, rather than focusing on success metrics of the society and social media. I believe teaching is one of the best ways to reinforce ones own learning.'

This perspective is an important one. We don't all have the same start in life, the same support, education or privileges – yet many of our targets are universal, which only serves to perpetuate and widen the gap between people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

While setting yourself goals can be a really important and useful strategy for self-improvement and personal progression – fixating on time limits probably isn't helpful, and can add

unnecessary layers of stress that can actually hinder your progress.

The key is understanding and accepting that things happen for people at different times – there is no one correct timetable for how your life is supposed to go.



How to cope with the pressure of time limits

‘We can’t escape comparisons and this is a very real trauma that millennials face.

‘We are constantly in a state of pressure to achieve what others are and if you have been born into the social media generation, even more so.

‘The key to manage and cope with this pressure, is to remind yourself that everyone’s story is different and that social media is a perception of someone’s life.

‘The start-up generation also adds pressure for everyone to be an entrepreneur, an influencer, a success by the time they’re 30 and it’s not realistic. The journey to achieve success is very different and we only ever really see the end result.

‘With the online space, the more you share, the more you can be scrutinised. Everyone has their own agenda regarding the content they share online and so should you. Always look at what you see with a pinch of salt. It’s only a small insight into somebody’s life and not reason to feel pressure to achieve what they have.

‘Focus on you and your own goals. Understand that there is still life beyond societal pressures, you just have to choose to live it.’

Puja K McClymont, certified life and business coach

Sam is a busy professional working in London’s financial sector. She says living in the capital is a different beast and that despite feeling that pressure at times, the key to happiness is focusing on her own achievements – and not the people around her.

‘Without sounding like a d***head Londoner, I don’t feel any pressure in London because I feel like it’s the norm to do everything later in life when you live in a big city,’ explains Sam.

‘I joke that it buys you an extra 10 years, but it really does because everyone does things later.

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‘When I hang out with my lovely family and friends who don’t live in a big city, they don’t pressurise me for being single and not having a house or a husband or a baby, but something internal makes me feel like I am behind personally – even though I am perfectly happy.

‘Some people give me the sad pity eyes, like I must be really miserable, but the honest truth is I’m really happy and you can be happy by yourself!

‘Don’t get me wrong, it would be amazing to meet someone to share my life with and I know I will eventually, but I’m not prepared to do that with someone just for the sake of meeting societal expectations of being married and having a baby by the time you’re 30.’

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